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ABSTRACT

To develop a method of categorizing public relations practitioners according to a hierarchy of professionalism which would also identify what training is needed to raise those in lower levels to higher levels, a study surveyed 93 Iowa practitioners listed in the 1986-87 Public Relations Society of America Register Issue. Response rate was 66% and usable rate was 54%. The survey used James Grunig's four models of public relations--press agent/publicity, public information, two-way asymmetric, and two-way symmetric--which combined two dimensions (direction of communication and balance of intended effect) to conceptualize public relations. Based on responses on a five-point Likert scale to 27 public relations model indexes, respondents were separated into the four models. The respondents within each model were then statistically tested to determine how well they correlated with 16 common public relations procedures. Next, the procedures were factor analyzed to determine if patterns existed, other than the four models already proposed, that would better stratify responses in a meaningful hierarchy of sophistication. Analysis indicated little support for the four-model approach to categorizing practitioners according to their activities. Results of the factor analysis showed a strong pattern of specialization among practitioners, indicating little crossover of activities between levels. (Two tables providing characteristics and index statements for the 4 public relations models, 2 tables of data, and 18 footnotes are attached.) (MM)

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TOWARD INCREASING PROFESSIONALISM IN PUBLIC RELATIONS: AN ACTIVITY-SPECIFIC SYSTEM FOR CATEGORIZING PRACTITIONERS

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The ability to categorize public relations practitioners, in some meaningful way, at the present point in the history of the field is valuable because of three situations: the growing need for accountability; the coincident need for more advanced training leading to more professionalism; and the confounding situation caused by the vast diversity of practitioners.

The financial difficulties of the late 1980s have led many corporations to take a harder look at the bottom line when deciding where necessary cuts are made.[1] The result has been slashes in some public relations departments because of their inability to justify their existence. Although the economy has improved, and public relations may return to the good graces of corporate executives, it is unlikely the lesson will be forgotten. It now seems imperative that practitioners institute measures to demonstrate to management what public relations contributes to the bottom line.

The need for accountability suggests the prerequisite need for more and better education and training, as has been the cry in the late 1980s.[2] More and better training is being considered a near necessity in the larger drive to elevate public relations to the status of a "profession," in the technical sense of fields such as law and medicine, including licensing.[3]

The task of raising the educational level of the field appears to be a formidable one. For example, one survey of practitioners found that 40 percent of the respondents had never had a course in public relations and 65 percent had taken two or fewer courses.[4]

The diversity of practitioners in public relations exacerbates the problem of raising the educational level of the field because it makes it difficult to determine, on other than an individual basis, who needs what type of training.[5]

Based on the assumption that higher levels of education lead to more sophisticated (accountability-oriented) approaches to public relations, which in turn lead to more professionalism, it would be useful to develop a method to categorize practitioners according to some hierarchy of professionalism which would also identify what training is needed to raise those in the lower levels to the higher levels. This paper reports a modest step in that direction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The research of Grunig provides an appropriate basis for this study since he was one of the first researchers to attempt to describe and predict the specific behavior of public relations practitioners in given situations.[6]

Grunig's research approach is based on his definition of public relations as "managed" organizational communication. The public relations behavior of individual organizations, then, is mediated by different environmental and structural variables within a systems theory of organizational communication.[7]

According to Grunig, public relations as managed organizational communication differs from typical organizational communication in that public relations practitioners within an organization set up and manage systems of communication both inside and outside the organization. This definition captures not only the public affairs responsibilities of an organization, but also the marketing support responsibilities. Implicit is the dual role of the public relations department to communicate and interact with the organization's varied publics and also provide marketing with the technical tools to communicate with consumers through means other than paid advertising.[8]

The theoretical basis for Grunig's research is a "multi-systems" approach that holds that public relations departments contribute to organizational success through systematic monitoring of relevant external constituencies that can affect or are affected by the organization. The theory also posits that the environment affects the structure of the organization which affects the communications behavior of the public relations department.[9]

In his mid 1970s studies Grunig attempted to answer the questions:

1. How do public relations practitioners behave in the real world?
2. When do some engage in informative and two-way communication and other in one-way, manipulative communication?
3. What relationship does the structure of the organization and the nature of its environment have with the activities of its public relations practitioners?[10]

In one study he surveyed 216 practitioners in the Washington, D.C. and Baltimore areas to determine the frequency with which they employed 16 common public relations procedures. Using Thayer's concept of synchronic (communication employed to synchronize the behavior of public for the benefit of the organization) and diachronic (communication employed to reach a mutually satisfactory position) communication,[11] Grunig grouped the 16 procedures into the two theoretical patterns of public relations behavior.

In addition, the study included variables representing other types of communication, the environment and the organization's structure.

By factor analyzing the results Grunig was able to identify two types of organizations:

1. Problem-solving: characterized by a dynamic environment and complex, decentralized, unstratified and formalized organizational structure.

2. Fatalistic: characterized by a static environment, a centralized and stratified structure that was less complex and less formalized than that of the problem-solving organization.[12]

In summarizing the study he concluded, "there is a clear relationship between the behavioral type of an organization, the professionalism of its public relations practitioner and the types of communication procedures it utilizes."[13]

However, lack of correlation in the data caused Grunig to reconsider what he apparently thought was too simple an explanation for public relations' behavior in relation to organizational structures and environments in the real world. What resulted was a new conceptualization of public relations based on combinations of two dimensions: direction of communication (one-way or two-way), and balance of intended effect (asymmetric or symmetric). The new models included press agentry/publicity (one-way asymmetrical), public information (one-way symmetrical), two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical.[14] Table 1 shows the characteristics of the four models.

Of particular interest to the objective of this paper is the nature of research, since research of some type is necessary to determine the success or failure of the public relations department's efforts -- in other words accountability. Research is of a very low order in the press agentry/publicity model, usually consisting of little more than determining if the media have used press releases, if people attended a promotional event or if customers bought a product.

The public information model also includes a relatively low order of research. Although practitioners in this model produce myriad materials, they usually have little idea of their effect. When research is employed,

it usually consists of surveys to determine if the intended audience has used or comprehended the information.

As the term "two-way" implies, the final two models seek information from publics through research, making research an integral part of their makeups. The two-way asymmetrical model utilizes research to determine what policies and procedures of the organization the publics accept and favor. Those policies and procedures are subsequently emphasized in communication campaigns in the hope that the publics will be persuaded to look favorably on the organization. Evaluative research in this model examines feedback in "much the same way as a thermostat monitors air temperature. The practitioner measures attitudes and behaviors before and after the public relations effort to see what effects the campaign has had."[15]

Research in the two-way symmetrical model is much different. Research is conducted to determine how the publics perceive the organization and then is used by the practitioner to counsel management in ways to better serve the publics' interests. Evaluative research then attempts to measure not whether a campaign has persuaded the publics to look favorably on the organization but whether there is improved understanding between the organization and its publics.[16]

In 1984, Grunig tested the multi-systems theory through a survey administered to 59 practitioners in 16 organizations in the Washington, D.C. area.[17] Most germane to the objective of this paper were the survey items used to measure each of the four models. Within the survey were 27 statements that were used to construct an 8-item index defining each of the models he had conceptualized, as shown in Table 2. Some of the statements were used in more than one model.

He concluded that the indices were reasonably accurate measures of the

four models.

METHODOLOGY

This study's approach to developing a system to categorize public relations practitioners, according to the activities or procedures they practice, was based on Grunig's research reported in the literature review. The study employed a two-stage design.

In the first stage, respondents were separated into the four models of public relations according to their responses on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly agree" (5) to "strongly disagree" (1), to Grunig's 27 items that comprised the model indices. The respondents were also asked to estimate, on a scale from 1 (never) to 10 (always), how often they performed the 16 public relations procedures Grunig employed in his earlier studies. The respondents within each model then were statistically tested to determine how well they correlated with the public relations procedures.

In the second stage, the 16 public relations procedures were factor analyzed to determine if there were patterns, other than those suggested by Grunig's four models, that would better stratify responses in a meaningful hierarchy of sophistication.

The data were gathered in the spring of 1987 by a mail survey of all Iowa practitioners listed in the 1986-87 Public Relations Society of America Register Issue,[18] except for academic instructors and those known to have retired or moved out of the state. Of the 93 surveys mailed, 61 were returned, including 11 that were considered unuseable, for a response rate of 66 percent and a usable rate of 54 percent.

RESULTS/DISCUSSION

Table 3 presents the results for the first stage of the study. The

findings indicate little support for the four-model approach to categorizing practitioners according to their activities. In fact, given the number of significant negative correlations, the table illustrates more graphically what practitioners don't do than what they do. The results show only three significant, positive correlations among the 64 correlations. And none of the activities correlated with the two-way asymmetrical model.

Despite the results, it would be rash to reject the four-model approach to categorizing practitioners. It could well be that the study was affected by the small number of subjects and the location of the study. The location particularly could have skewed the results. At the time of the study Iowa was in the throes of economic depression which could have caused atypical behavior by practitioners surveyed. For example, other results from the study not reported in this paper indicated a surprisingly low level of "professionalism" among the respondents, probably lower than would be found in better economic times.

It also should be noted that Grunig's four models were not intended for a study of this type, but were used as a convenient structure to build upon. Therefore, it is suggested that the four-model approach should be applied on a wider geographic basis to give it a fair test.

The results of the factor analysis of 15 of the 16 public relations procedures in the second stage of the study are presented in Table 4. Speech writing was eliminated from the analysis because of the small number of respondents who engaged in the activity. The boldfaced factor loadings indicate which variables load significantly on which factors, using the generally accepted 0.5 lower limit.

The three factors in essence define three different types or levels of public relations practitioner. Factor 3 appears to define the staff writer,

indicating the typical entry level position in a public relations department. There is no apparent research dimension at this level and therefore no attempt at accountability.

The second factor describes a project/information production practitioner. Most of the activities at this level are geared toward some form of information dissemination, including house organs, press conferences, staged events and audiovisual materials. This level approximates a combination of Grunig's publicity/press agentry and public information models, except that there appears to be at least a low level of informal research since these practitioners have informal contacts with newsmen and contact government officials. However, there is little evidence of any concerted effort at accountability. Puzzling is the inclusion of the variable "counseling management on public opinion" in the activities at this level. Given the low level of contacts with publics, a logical question is, "With what information do they counsel management?" One possible answer is that practitioners at this level may serve as interpreters to translate information, gathered by the totally research oriented practitioners represented by Factor 1, into a form suitable for management.

As mentioned above, Factor 1 describes practitioners whose sole activity is research -- almost identical to the research element described in Grunig's two-way symmetrical model. The variables loading on the factor are formal and informal research before and after projects, informal contacts with the public and contacts with thought leaders.

One variable, "writing institutional advertisements," did not load on any of the factors, perhaps indicating that this activity does not routinely fall within the duties of the public relations department.

CONCLUSIONS

The caveat concerning the limitations of the study notwithstanding, the results of the factor analysis of public relations activities present some interesting implications. First, they imply a fairly strong pattern of specialization among practitioners. It appears that those practitioners working at a given level for the most part confine their activities within that level with no significant crossover to activities at other levels.

Concerning the issue of accountability, the three-level design offers direction for improvement. For example, if practitioners in a department all fall within the staff writer or project/information production levels, it is necessary either to train someone to reach the research level or to hire someone at that level in order to have the ability to prove the department's worth. One question unanswerable at this point is whether it is possible for someone at the staff writer level to rise directly to the research level. It does seem probable, though, that the practitioner at the staff writer level can be trained in other types of information production in order to rise to the middle level.

However, the above approach presents some serious problems and suggests a possible need to rethink the idea of professionalism in public relations.

To retreat for a moment, this study began with the idea that it is desirable for practitioners at lower levels of sophistication to obtain the training necessary to raise them, and the field, to higher levels. The results of this study suggest, however, that since there is so little crossover of activities between levels, if a training program was successful in raising all practitioners to the research level no one would be left to write the press releases, stage events, etc.

Put another way, it may not be feasible to expect practitioners trained

at one level to perform activities in lower levels. Further, it is likely that many practitioners prefer to work at the lower levels with no desire to attain the research level. Does that then mean that those who prefer to work at the lower levels can never be considered true professionals? Most observers would probably agree that is an inappropriate categorization of practitioners because it indicates that some activities are more important than others, when they may in actuality just be different. It is perhaps more useful to think of the results not as three levels in a hierarchical sense, but rather as different dimensions of more or less equal importance.

A possible dimensional approach to the issue of professionalism and perhaps licensing, or some other form of accreditation, can be borrowed from other fields. For example, in medicine all physicians must pass certain broad-based exams to be admitted to the profession. From there they can, with additional training, attempt to qualify for a variety of specialities. The categories developed in this study present possibilities for a similar type of certification system. People who wish to be called public relations practitioners could be required to pass a general competence examination. If they wished to work in more specialized areas, such as research, they could be required to pursue additional, specified training and pass an additional examination. Furthermore, as is the case in the medical profession, public relations practitioners could be required to be recertified at specified intervals to make certain they are up-to-date on their profession.

A certification system such as this would solve many of the problems presently facing the field. And although it is only one alternative, and one drawn from an admittedly limited study, it does suggest a potentially fruitful area for further inquiry.

ENDNOTES

[1]Alyse Lynn Booth, "Strength in Numbers," Public Relations Journal, September 1986, p. 26; and Daniel H. Baer, "Ensure Your Firm's Future," Public Relations Journal, August 1987, p. 30.

[2]Michael Winkelman, "The Paper Chase," Public Relations Journal, April 1987, p. 17.

[3]James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt, Managing Public Relations (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston Publishing Co., 1984) pp. 66-68.

[4]Frank B. Kalupa and C. Gay Sievers, "Public Relations Licensure: Practitioner and Educator Attitudes," paper presented to the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Aug. 3-6, 1986, p. 16.

[5]Ibid, p. 2.

[6]James E. Grunig, "Organizations and Public Relations: Testing a Communication Theory," Journalism Monographs, 2 (April 1975).

[7]James E. Grunig and Larissa S. Grunig, "Toward a Theory of the Public Relations Behavior of Organizations: Review of a Program of Research," in press (College Park: College of Journalism, University of Maryland, 1986) p. 2.

[8]Ibid., p. 3.

[9]Ibid., p. 4.

[10]"Organizations and Public Relations," p. 1.

[11]Ibid., p. 6.

[12]Ibid., p. 7.

[13]Ibid., p. 49.

[14]James E. Grunig, "Organizations, Environments, and Models of Public Relations," Public Relations Research and Education, 1 (Winter 1984) p. 9.

[15]Managing Public Relations, p. 25.

[16]Ibid.

[17]"Organizations, Environments, and Models of Public Relations," p. 17.

[18]Public Relations Journal 1986-87 PRSA Register Issue, Vol. 42, No. 6R, June 1986.

Table 1. Characteristics of Four Models of Public Relations[a]

	Press Agentry/ Publicity	Public Information	Two-way Asymmetric	Two-way Symmetric
Purpose	Propaganda	Dissemination of Information	Scientific Persuasion	Mutual Satisfaction
Organizational Goal	Control/ Domination	Adaption/ Cooperation	Control/ Domination	Adaption/ Cooperation
PR Contribution to Goal	Advocacy	Dissemination of Information	Advocacy	Mediation
Nature of Communication	One-way Complete Truth Not Essential	One-way Truth Important	Two-way Imbalanced Effects	Two-way Balanced Effects
Communication Model	Source→Rec.	Source→Rec.	Source↔Rec. (Feedback)	Group↔Group
Nature of Research	Little; Counting House	Little; Readership	Formative, Evaluative	Formative, Evaluative
Leading Historical Figures	P.T. Barnum	Ivy Lee	Edward L. Bernays	Bernays, Educators
Where Practiced Today	Sports, Theatre, Product Promo	Government, Non-profit Assns.	Competitive Business, Agencies	Regulated Business Agencies

[a]James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt, Managing Public Relations (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston Publishing Co., 1984) p. 6.

Table 2. Index Statements for the Four Models of Public Relations[a]

Press Agentry/Publicity

Purpose:

The purpose of public relations in this organization is to publicize the organization, its products, and its services in any way possible.

In this organization, public relations and promotion mean essentially the same thing.

Organizational Goal:

In a broad sense, I would say the primary goal of our public relations program is to help the organization control the publics that affect it.

Public Relations role:

This organization perceives the publicrelations department, first and foremost, to be an advocate for the organization.

Nature of Communication:

Most public relations programs in this organization involve one-way communication -- from the organization to the publics.

Media Relations Philosophy:

Our media relations program strives to get favorable publicity into the media and to keep unfavorable publicity out.

Role of Research:

Our public relations people believe that public relations is essentially an art that cannot be measured.

If people show up for an event or use our products and services, we know that our public relations efforts have been successful.

Public Information

Purpose:

The purpose of public relations in this organization is to disseminate information to the public as truthfully and accurately as possible.

In this organization, public relations people are essentially journalists in residence.

Organizational Goal:

The primary goal of our public relations program is to help the organization change to reduce the negative impact it has on its publics.

Table 2. (continued)

Public Relations Role:
The organization believes the public relations department should be more of a neutral disseminator of information than an advocate for the organization or a mediator between management and publics.

Nature of Communication:
Most public relations programs in this organization involve one-way communication -- from the organization to the publics.

Media Relations Philosophy:
Our media relations philosophy is to tell the truth to the media even if it is unfavorable to the organization.

Role of Research:
In our public relations department, nearly everyone is so busy writing press releases or producing publications that there is no time to do any research.

Keeping a clipping file is about the only way we have of monitoring the success of our public relations programs.

Two-way Asymmetric

Purpose:
The purpose of public relations in this organization is to persuade the public to agree with the organization's point of view.

In this organization, we try to determine what public attitudes are toward the organization and how they might be changed.

Organizational Goal:
In a broad sense, I would say the primary goal of our public relations program is to help the organization control the publics that affect it.

Public Relations Role:
This organization perceives the public relations department, first and foremost, to be an advocate for the organization.

Nature of Communication:
Most public relations programs in this organization involve two-way communication between the organization and publics.

Media Relations Philosophy:
When we provide information to the media, we use whatever information we can find on the possible effect the information will have on the public to make sure the public sees the organization more favorably.

Table 2. (continued)

Nature of Research:

Before starting a public relations program, we usually look at attitude surveys to make sure we describe the organization and its policies in ways the public is likely to accept.

Our public relations department uses attitude research by commercial firms or that it does itself to find out if we have been successful in changing people's attitudes.

Two-way Symmetric

Purpose:

The purpose of public relations in this organization is to develop mutual understanding between the management of the organization and publics the organization affects.

In this organization, public relations tries to change the attitudes and behavior of management as often as it tries to change the attitudes and behavior of publics.

Organizational Goal:

The primary goal of our public relation program is to help the organization change to reduce the negative impact it has on its publics.

Public Relations Role:

This organization believes the public relations department should provide mediation for the organization to help management and publics negotiate conflict.

Nature of Communication:

Most public relations programs in this organization involve two-way communication between the organization and publics.

Media Relations Philosophy:

Our media relations philosophy is to open the organization to reporters and to help them contact news sources inside the organizations themselves.

Nature of Research:

We evaluate our public relations programs by doing surveys or informal research of how many people have been exposed to our programs and how much they have learned about the organization -- not by surveys to find out if we changed their attitudes.

Before starting a public relations program, we try to do surveys or informal research to find out how much management and our publics understand how each other think.

[a]James E. Grunig, "Organizations, Environments, and Models of Public Relations," Public Relations Research and Education, Winter, 1984, pp. 12-15.

Table 3. Correlations Among Sixteen Public Relations Procedures and the Four Models of Public Relations

	Press Agentry/ Publicity	Public Information	Two-way Asymmetric	Two-way Symmetric
Writing press releases	.05	.23	-.10	-.08
Conducting formal research before beginning a project	-.15	-.34[a]	.21	.34[a]
Conducting formal research to evaluate a project	-.03	-.37[b]	.17	.19
Conducting informal research before beginning a project	-.33[a]	-.22	.16	-.17
Conducting informal research to evaluate a project	-.28[a]	-.37[b]	-.09	.12
Preparing house organs, publications	.07	.38[b]	.07	.03
Making informal contacts with newsmen	-.16	.04	.14	.11
Holding press conferences	-.22	.15	.01	.05
Making informal contacts with public	-.03	-.22	.10	.08
Making contacts with thought leaders	-.07	-.21	-.01	-.15
Staging events, tours, open houses	.01	-.15	-.02	.04
Preparing tapes, films	.10	.16	.10	.16
Preparing institutional advertisements	.29[a]	.15	.27	.17

Table 3. (continued)

	Press Agentry/ Publicity	Public Information	Two-way Asymmetric	Two-way Symmetric
Counseling management on public opinion	-.34[a]	-.32[a]	.06	.22
Contacting government officials	-.21	-.07	.07	.06
Writing speeches	-.09	.09	-.22	-.28[a]

[a] $p < .05$

[b] $p < .01$

Table 4. Three-factor Analysis of Fifteen Public Relations Procedures

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Writing press releases	-.35	.42	.62
Conducting formal research before beginning a project	.75	.26	-.02
Conducting formal research to evaluate a project	.70	.01	.07
Conducting informal research before beginning a project	.80	-.05	.06
Conducting informal research to evaluate a project	.81	-.17	.07
Preparing house organs, publications	-.27	.55	.18
Making informal contacts with newsmen	.24	.72	-.15
Holding press conferences	-.06	.69	-.04
Making informal contacts with public	.58	.39	-.39
Making contacts with thought leaders	.60	.29	-.11
Staging events, tours, open houses	.25	.56	.36
Preparing tapes, films	-.02	.66	.38
Preparing institutional advertisements	.19	.04	.19
Counseling management on public opinion	.44	.57	-.07
Contacting government officials	.29	.71	-.21